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Speaking out against suffering: Neoliberalism, masculinity and everyday silencing of suffering at work

Introduction

Organizational practices that value the economic imperative and instrumental rationality at all costs (leading to costs cuttings, layoffs, increased use of auditing and performance monitoring) generate feelings of insecurity and failure and lead to various forms of physical and psychic despair, suffering and unwellness (Dale and Burrell, 2013). When individuals in the workplace suffer – either consciously or unconsciously – and yet, remain quiet about it, we can assume that they accommodate themselves with powerful forces that prioritize efficiency and productivity. Ignoring risk and the sense of danger to one's survival and well-being – rather than speaking about them and challenging them – means accommodating oneself to power because powerful organizational norms and discourses demand competency and productivity above anything else. Speaking about suffering is therefore a threat to productivity and power.

In this exploratory paper, I investigate the factors that make people accommodate themselves with power and thus prevent people from speaking out against suffering. What are the social and psychic forces that frustrate the courage to speak about suffering at work and thus speak against working conditions that create suffering?

The paper begins by drawing on Christophe Dejours's¹ and Jean-Phillip Deranty's psychodynamic theory of work – which is very rarely cited by organization

¹ Apart from Dejours (1993, 2007, 2012) and Dejours and Deranty (2010), most of Dejours' work is in French. However, Jean-Phillip Deranty has written a number of papers about Dejours' work in English. The present paper therefore relies heavily on Deranty's interpretation of Dejours (Deranty, 2008, 2009, 2010).

scholars – in order to theorize work and its relationship to suffering and contemporary forms of organizing. Dejours's theory of work is significant because it explains how exactly modern organization make workers suffer. More and more people suffer through their work, and at the same time, suffering is becoming increasingly invisible and unutterable. I then discuss collective and virile forms of defense mechanisms in organizations that can make workers turn a blind eye to suffering. Subsequently, I argue that such defense mechanisms are a result of the neoliberal economic system and forms of organizing. But how exactly do defense mechanisms emerge? In the final section, I suggest that silencing of suffering occurs in subtle ways through discourse, and especially through hegemonic masculine discourses, which create (masculine) forms of defense strategies which prevent workers to speak out against working conditions that make people suffer

Work and suffering in contemporary organizations

Dejours draws from his decades-long clinical experience with individuals who suffer from work-related distress to generate a psychodynamic conceptualization of work. Suffering underlies his theory of work: even though there is some level of suffering in all forms of work, work can contribute to subjective enrichment, but it can also remain a painful and suffering experience. To a large extent, Dejours' work is concerned with identifying the conditions that turn the experience of work either into one of subjective expansion and freedom or one of continuous suffering. Dejours definition of work highlights the subjective investment required of the working subject to complete a task:

Work is what is implied, in human terms, by the fact of working: gestures, know-how, the involvement of the body and the intelligence, the ability to analyse, interpret, and react to situations. It is the power to feel, to think, and to invent. In other words, for the clinician, work is not above all the wage relation or employment but 'working', which is to say, the way the personality is involved in confronting a task that is subject to constraints (material and social) (Dejours, 2007, p. 72).

Work is from this perspective not understood in abstract, rational and non-material ways. Rather, it is viewed as the practice of *working* – or we could also say organizing – an action on the environment that requires bodily effort and the deployment of subjectivity. This theory directs attention towards another significant aspect of work: the objective world that poses a challenge to the subject and puts a limit to action. The organization of work – or prescriptions, guidelines, or instructions – is never the same as the actual reality of the concrete work activity; something(s) interrupts the simple application of rules and guidelines. Dejours employs the word ‘real’ to mean anything that disrupts the accomplishment of a work task according to given instructions by the prescribed organization of work. The real is “the element that separates the task to be done from the activity that actually does it” (Deranty, 2009: 80) and almost all types of work entail the real. The real may include fatigue, insufficient skills/experience or the occurrence of unexpected events (for example, breakdowns of machines, tools, materials and systems, or disruptions that arise due to other colleagues, bosses or subordinates). The real implies “the experience of the world’s resistance” (Dejours and Deranty, 2010: 171). In other words, to realize a concrete work task, the subject confronts the objective world, and in doing so it will face unanticipated problems and interruptions that need to be overcome. The prescribed organization never accounts for everything that is involved in the actual ‘doing’ of work; they always fail to capture the actual experience of work, which entails moments of interruptions and blockages. What this implies is that “work mobilizes not just logical or technical capacities, but also the affective, sensitive resources of the body” (Deranty, 2010: 201). From Dejours’ perspective, to carry out a work task, the worker needs to mobilize intellect and affect and to ‘give’ himself or herself to the task. To complete a task – or to put it more precisely, in order to conquer the resistance of the world – the subject needs to apply effort. Even the most thorough guidelines require some degree of resourcefulness and effort on the part of the worker. Work requires participation and engagement of the subject and the confrontation with the real, and the subjective and bodily investment demanded by work involve an “affective suffering” (Dejours, 2007, in Deranty, 2008: 452). The effort demanded by work entails strenuous exertion: it involves the body and affect, and as the philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset stated ‘effort is only effort when it begins to hurt’.

As stated already, suffering is at the center of Dejours' theory of subjectivity. The subject is essentially vulnerable and fragile, and this is particularly evident when the subject is at work. Deranty (2008) claims that work "always tests the subject's capacities, it touches precisely the essential vulnerability of the human agent" (p. 451-452). Work is suffering experience not least because it puts the subject's capacities into question, and the risk of failure is immanent. Dejours' theory highlights that failure is part and parcel of the experience of work. Failure obstructs subjective investment and generates insecurity and affective suffering. To cope with suffering requires "initiative, creativity and cooperation of workers" (Dejours, 1993: 81), and these are factors that also generate interest in work and are a source of pleasure. However, if the real of work is too powerful, which can be due to technological impediments or to social and organizational obstacles – for example, excessive expectations or prescriptions, intense forms of control over the work process, or routine and menial work – the subject will remain suffering. Dejours' commentary on current workplaces and their effect on the health of employees is informed by his own and his colleagues' observations as consultants and as mental health practitioners. Dejours has attempted to disclose to the French public the level of suffering, which is strongly linked to working conditions, that many people experience in organizations. Deranty (2008) implies that the suffering experienced by people at work is rooted in so-called post-bureaucratic forms of work organizations and post-Fordist management techniques. "The transformations in workplaces and the changed nature of work processes have caused many individuals to suffer from a sense of increased existential precariousness, which manifests itself in new, sometimes dramatic, individual and collective pathologies" (Deranty, 2008: 444). Precariousness, Deranty argues, is from this psychodynamic perspective not merely a social phenomenon; it does not only refer to weakened social bonds and protections. Precariousness refers first and foremost to insecurities related to the work activity and working conditions. It alludes to uncertain employment, but more importantly, to the "precarisation of work itself, as a subjective experience" (Deranty, 2008: 456). Indeed, the main affect of neoliberal society is precariousness or fear (Deranty, 2008). The management techniques of contemporary organizations, which take competition for granted, have a profound impact on the psyche, the body and on well-being. They destroy hope, which is the

affect necessary to be able to cope with the inevitable suffering (and insecurity) of work. Fear and suffering, rather than hope is the prevailing affect in the contemporary workplace: fear of losing one's job, fear of one's colleagues and managers, fear of not coping with the constant changes in the workplace, fear of not being able to complete the task and fear of not performing (Deranty, 2008). Suffering is thus endemic in many organizations, and this is not merely due to inter-relational problems such as bullying or other forms of harassments, but also, and possibly more widespread, is the suffering which is rooted in the relationship between the social sphere and the instrumental sphere (Deranty, 2008) – even though of course these two types of suffering are often intertwined. The social organization of contemporary work, which is based on competition and creates work intensification, is a major obstruction to the realization of the task and generates an enduring state of suffering. Individual ratings of performance lead to suspicion, rather than collaboration among workers and prevent the establishment of a strong work collective that can support people to cope with the real of work and that can provide recognition of individuals' work. Such situations create barriers for workers to sublimate the suffering that work brings about.

Dejours and Derantys' arguments are confirmed by research that illustrates how contemporary techniques of management, concerned with reducing costs and maximizing profits, often have damaging consequences for workers, leading to for example, work intensification, job insecurity and long working hours (e.g. Bolton and Houlihan, 2007). In his classical book *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal consequences of work in new capitalism*, Sennett (1998) claimed that globalized, flexible work arrangements damage trust, loyalty and bonds between people in the workplace. Flexible, fragmented careers create a fragmented sense of existence, and the constant evaluation of performance generates a culture of insecurity and fear. Indeed, organizations today are the context of suffering (Driver, 2007). There is a growing concern about the physical or psychological pain and stress that workers experience as a result of detrimental work conditions and organizational structures and cultures (e.g. Butts, 1997; Dale and Burrell, 2014; Snell, 1992). To sum up, according to Dejours's psychodynamic perspective and a great deal of sociological and organizational theory, the experience of work in modern society involves a great

deal of suffering. But what does suffering mean exactly? Deranty (2008) states that suffering has two related meanings in Dejours. First, it refers to the capacity of the subject to be *affected* by the world: “anticipation of suffering as a result of ones being in the world is constitutive of subjectivity” (Deranty, 2008: 449). The subject thus experiences the effect of the world affectively, through his or her body. Experience in the world also entails sensing the restrictions posed by one’s body. This is why work plays such an important role in Dejours’ notion of subjectivity: because work is the foremost activity in which the subject is affected by the world and experiences the limits of his or her body (Deranty, 2008). Second, suffering implies pain. “Suffering in the sense of pain arises when the defense mechanisms are overwhelmed by the situation” (Deranty, 2008: 449); when there is a fear of not being able to cope. Even though the experience of suffering is inevitable, hope creates a sense that one has adequate resources to handle it. Suffering is then associated with fear and a perpetual sense of precariousness. As we will argue below, suffering is mostly silenced in organizations. However, it can be identified in “various guises of sickness, absence, injury, accident and disability” (Dale and Burrell, p. 166). Suffering is often expressed in various forms of physical symptoms, but it can also be revealed in speech and discourse that hints at distress and anxiety. The notion of suffering is useful (as opposed to a more common term often used in organization studies, such as insecurity) as it connotes the embodied/affective experience of pain, and at the same time suffering acknowledges that pain is socially situated – the sufferer suffers because he or she has been affected by the environment.

Turning a blind eye: defense mechanisms against suffering

Given the widespread suffering that people experience due to working conditions, why do so few people speak out against it? The establishment of collective defense mechanisms may be one reason why workers turn a blind eye and accept suffering. According to Dejours, when work or the working conditions pose a risk to subjectivity, workers often develop defense mechanisms as a way of dealing with the threat of vulnerability. These defense mechanisms entail the denial of suffering: “the denial of suffering at work [is] witnessed in particular in collective defense strategies, which develop ultra-virile cultures to avert the risk of destabilization caused by work vulnerability” (Deranty, 210: 206). This argument has some parallels with

organizational research that demonstrate how masculine identities often repress vulnerability and the feeling of being endangered. Wicks (2001) in his study of the 1992 explosion at Westray Mines that killed 26 miners demonstrated that it was the mindset of invulnerability that partly contributed to the explosion. Being a miner implied being tough and taking risks and miners “often talked of the dangers of working underground, yet at the same time almost basked in these dangers, by portraying themselves as ‘real men’, by going where few men would dare to go”. (Wicks, 2001: 681). Such masculine positions prevented the establishment of a collective voice that would challenge the dangers and risks involved in their work. Wicks (2001) claims that although Westray was a unique case and even though there is a risk of accident integral to coal mining, the existence of similar dysfunctional organizational norms and behaviours may exist in all organizations. More recently, Johnston and Hodge (2014) study showed that hospital security officers, who dealt with emotionally difficult tasks, such as storing cadavers in the morgue and releasing dead bodies to funeral homes, coped through developing ultra-masculine attitudes of resiliency and toughness. Despite a daily exposure to death and bodily fluids, there were no spaces in which workers could vent or release emotions. The absence of organizationally sanctioned spaces where workers can speak about the difficult aspects of their jobs indicates that virile defense mechanisms emerge within organizational contexts that constrain the expression of emotion, especially emotions of vulnerability and weakness. As Johnston and Hodge argued, those who complained about the disturbing components of their jobs faced reprisal from other colleagues and senior staff. Similarly, Wicks (2001: 672) found that those miners who raised concerns about mine safety would face punishments or risk losing their jobs. Thus, virile attitudes and identities that repudiate vulnerability – and thus deny suffering - should be seen as born out of wider organizational norms that value strength and resilience and that do not tolerate the expression of weakness. Such cultures lead to defense mechanisms that prevent people from speaking against and contest working conditions that create suffering. However, it is important to point out the wider socio-political and economic system that organizations operate in: the intolerance of vulnerability is a condition of neoliberal ideology. There is thus a connection between virile defense mechanism at work, neoliberal socio-economic system and the silencing of suffering.

Neoliberalism and the normalization of suffering

Deranty (2008) suggests that in the neoliberal economic system that prioritizes financial success and efficiency, the suffering incurred at work is publicly downplayed or denied. Indeed, organization scholars argue that a very high level of suffering and unwellness related to work remains unreported (Dale and Burrell, 2014). Under pressure to perform well financially, organizations aspire to show a successful image of themselves to the public and to shareholders by hiding inefficiencies and failures in production, silencing those that challenge the positive image, resist management, or try to reveal the extent of suffering (Deranty, 2008). This leads to a situation where the public denial of suffering becomes internalized and workers begin to deny their suffering themselves, and this process is intensified in environments where people are fearful of losing their jobs. The insecurities related to one's work generated by neoliberalism are a major cause of this denial of suffering at the level of the individual. Fear is "factored in in the new social contract. This is the fear of the individual towards everyone else since they all are now competitors engaged in the same state of nature. This is also the fear of maintaining one's position, one's status, etc." (Deranty, 2008: 61). The consequence of this is organizations that take suffering and fear for granted: suffering becomes normalized. "The conditions of the contemporary economic world require that everyone be ready to accept to suffer through their work, to witness the suffering of others and to make others suffer" (Deranty, 2008: 460). Solidarity and collective support are replaced by instrumental rationality and an economic worldview that accepts suffering without question and that leaves each individual to their own suffering. Suffering becomes invisible in social and organizational discourse and it becomes invisible to workers themselves. For the worker, suffering becomes an unsayable and 'a hidden thought' (p. 459) and this repression of suffering leads to a viscous cycle in which silencing of suffering – the inability to speak about it – only leads to more suffering. The virile defense mechanisms against suffering must thus be viewed as a consequence of this silencing that occurs at the societal, organizational and individual levels.

Discourse, masculinity and everyday silencing of suffering in organizations

We have argued thus far that a neoliberal socio-economic system that values financial success above all else creates organizations that hide inefficiencies and failures to the outside world and produce cultures of fear that prevents people from speaking out against suffering at work. Ironically, despite widespread fear experienced among workers, neoliberal organizations engender collective and virile forms of defense mechanisms among workers that repress fear and feelings of vulnerability. Such defenses further silences suffering at the level of the subject. What is missing from this account is a discussion of the precise means through which speaking about suffering and contesting it becomes frustrated at the level of the subject. Because this silencing at the level of the subject is a powerful form of silencing: Speaking out against suffering becomes impossible if people are not even able to admit to themselves that they are suffering.

In this section, I suggest that silencing occurs in subtle ways through discourse, and especially through hegemonic masculine discourses. There is a close – but often unrecognized – link between masculinity and neoliberalism. As Connell (2010: 33) states, “there is an embedded masculinity politics in the neoliberal project”.

Neoliberalism and masculinity both are concerned with autonomy, rationality and individual self-interest (Knights and Tullberg 2012: 389). Furthermore, organizational scholars have long pointed out that organizations are gendered (Acker, 1990) and that masculine discourses are dominant in management and in organizations (Fotaki, 2013; Kerfoot and Knights 1998; 2004; Knights, 2014; Murgia and Poggio, 2009). Masculinity refers to norms, behaviours and discourses associated with the category ‘man’, but we shall underscore that “masculinity(s) is not a stable feature of specific, individual men, but is constructed in an on-going fashion through various discourses, activities and micropractices” (Mumby 2000: 168-169). Gender, following Butler (1990), should be viewed as a performance, as accomplished in everyday discourses and social interactions. Connell's (1995) well-known notion of hegemonic masculinity is related to a series of practices, which construct men as risk taking, rational, aggressive, independent and heterosexual. Schippers (2007) befittingly describes Connell's theory of masculinity as follows:

First, it is social location that individuals, regardless of gender, can move into through practice. Second, it is a set of practices and characteristics understood to be “masculine”. Third, when these practices are embodied especially by men, but also by women, they have widespread cultural and social effects (p. 86).

Hegemonic masculinity can be understood as a mode of organizational power entrenched in organizational interactions and practices of assessment (Murgia and Poggio, 2009). Indeed, “masculine standards...are deeply and intricately woven in organizational life” (Forbes, 2002: 270). Masculinity can thus be viewed as a “sub-text” in organizations (Murgia and Poggio, 2009: 415).

Masculine discourses are modes of control through which worker’s subjectivities are shaped and manipulated. In order to explore the mundane practices that turn suffering into an unspeakable reality for many workers, we must acknowledge the complex processes through which the subjectivities of workers are controlled through discourse. These processes make people accept the dominant power relations and organizational practices, and hence, prevent people from speaking out against the work conditions that lead to suffering. Scholars have written extensively how control can operate via discursive mechanisms that exploit and manipulate workers’ identities and self-images (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Willmott, 1993, 2005). Lacanian organizational studies illustrate how neoliberal market-based discourses seduce workers at an affective level by responding to their search for recognition and fulfillment (e.g. Bloom and Cederstrom, 2009; Ekman, 2013; Hoedemaekers, 2010; Kenny, 2012). Workers are called on to conform to dominant discourses of ‘performance’ or ‘achievement’ (Hoedemaekers and Keegan, 2010). While such discursive practices shape subjectivities at work, they also “eliminate certain issues from arenas of speech and sound” (Simpson and Lewis, 2005: 1255). Discourse defines certain privileged meanings and simultaneously excludes alternative, competing meanings. “In other words, representations depend on a devalued and silent/invisible ‘other’ for legitimation. There is therefore a hierarchical arrangement based on what is said (presence) and what is unsaid (absence)...the ‘unsaid’ can thus be illustrative of power being articulated” (Simpson and Lewis, 2005: 1261). Relations of power thus depend on silences and discursive processes produce and

sustain silence. Neoliberal and masculine discourses of ‘achievement’ and ‘performance’ thus silence alternative discourses that would enable people to speak out against suffering. Simpson and Lewis (2005) claim that certain areas of concern are suppressed because in organizations hegemonic notions of masculinity underpin the privileged discursive regimes, which silence ideologies of femininity. In neoliberal organizations, the ideal worker is a masculine worker. Masculinity elevates reason and represses the body and emotion. According to the Cartesian dualist logic, the mind and the body are split, and the masculine is associated with the mind and rationality, and the feminine with the body and emotion (Burrell, 1984). Masculine thinking is a form of binary thinking: “This privileging of one side of a binary – the so-called objective over the subjective, individual over society, reason over emotion, linear rationality over other forms of rationality, reflect and reproduce the elevation of masculine above feminine discourses and subjectivities” (Knights, 2014: 4). The masculine symbolic order (Fotaki, 2013: 1253) often incites women to conform to masculine ideals in order to secure their position (Forbes 2002) and those women who do not conform are marginalized, along with some men.

Alvesson and Billing (2009: 77) imply that the concept of masculinity is too “researcher-driven” and does not account for variety of meanings that people assign to the ‘masculine’. “For most gender researchers the entire area of management may be seen as fused with masculine meanings, but for many blue-collar workers, the polite, tidy and physically safe area of management and white-collar work may appear as feminine or as perhaps rather ungendered” (Alvesson and Billing, 2009: 77). I agree that the meaning of masculinity varies according to class, time and context. However, most traditional (and still dominant) versions of masculinity reject weakness, vulnerability, frailness, impotency and suffering. While acknowledging the existence of multiple forms of masculinities, Knights (2014), Kerfoot and Knights (1993, 1998) and Knights and Kerfoot (2004) discuss a taken for granted, privileged form, transmitted in organizational discourses, processes and cultures, which produces and encourages certain types of subjectivities, behaviors and practices. This masculinity prioritizes disembodied subjectivities that are “technically rational, performance-oriented, highly instrumental, devoid of intimacy yet preoccupied with identity and driven by rarely reflected upon corporate or bureaucratic goals that are

presumed inviolable” (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004: 436). Instrumental rationality and cognitive thinking is valued over emotion and the body and more feminine discourses and subjectivities are repressed (Knights, 2014). The organized body is primarily the disengaged, disciplined and emotionally controlled male body (Hassard et al., 2000). This is the standard body against which other bodies, such as female, black – and we could add, the suffering body – are evaluated and identified as problematic for organizations. Michel's (2014) longitudinal study showed how city bankers ignored their bodies and neglected signs of ill health. Although she does not discuss discourse, masculinity or neoliberalism, she describes the most exemplary neoliberal organizations of all (banks) that contain cultures, which express ideals of masculinity. Even though very minimal formal systems of control existed (workers could choose what hours to work and how to work), the results-driven and competitive environment controlled workers' behaviors in invisible ways, entrapping them in extreme overwork. In order to cope and sustain such intense work practices, bankers had to turn a blind eye to the deterioration of their physical and psychological health. The emphasis put on autonomy in the organization made the bankers believe that working extreme hours was their own choice. As a consequence, bankers did not notice how the practices and discourses of the bank intensified work effort and created work habits that engendered physical and psychological suffering. Bankers – who experienced themselves as autonomous – were therefore unable to speak out against such practices because they did not even view themselves as suffering.

Autonomy, independence and individualism are largely Western ideals elevated by discourses of masculinity (Connell, 1987). In masculine organizations, if suffering is discussed, it is often talked about in the language of ‘stress’ or ‘burnout’, which are viewed as the problem of the individual, rather than as suffering that is generated by working conditions. The independent individual is expected to deal with his or her own stress and burnout, rather than speak about suffering openly as a consequence of the environment. Independence “derives meaning, in part, from its implicitly opposite: dependence, an orientation historically and culturally linked to women and femininity” (Meyerson, 1998: 108-109). Dependence is counter to meanings of masculinity, which is according to Meyerson, associated with strength, autonomy, achievement. Meyerson showed that social workers within a medical and masculine

culture “talked about burnout as an individual disease and excessive stress as an individual’s inability to cope” (p. 108). This very much reflects the view of organizational theory itself, which presents stress and burnout as abnormal emotional and physical conditions that the individual needs to control. She states that the language of control over the body is based on a mind/body dualism rooted in a gendered discourse which views arousal and burnout as ailments of the irrational body. This construction of burnout suggests that one should be in control of one’s emotions and body and not admit to or speak about burning out. “The dominant discourse does not include a vocabulary for engaging emotions or for talking about “being out of control” as a legitimate human experience” (Meyerson, 1998:112). In a large number of organizations, “there is the “stigma of an individual ‘not being able to cope’” (Dale and Burrell, 2014: 170). For example, Harkness (et al., 2005) pointed out the informal rules that sanctioned female clerical workers to express ‘negative emotions’ and the lack of discourses that would enable individuals to voice experiences of stress at work. “Appearing vulnerable, weak, or incompetent was presented as reasons to stay silent about stress” (p. 128).

Taking into consideration hegemonic masculine discourses in organizations, we arrive at a more advanced understanding of defense mechanisms discussed above.

Hegemonic masculine discourses in neoliberal organizations create (masculine) forms of defense strategies which prevent workers to speak out against working conditions that make them suffer. Layton (2010), drawing from her psychoanalytic clinical practice, argues that there is a clear connection between neoliberal societies and the establishment of psychic defense mechanisms that can be found at a collective level. She claims neoliberalism encourages people to disavow many painful truths, including the experience of suffering, vulnerability and dependency; feelings which have become increasingly shameful. The professional middle classes are constantly defending themselves against vulnerability with the ‘lie of self-sufficiency’, narcissism and the fantasy of omnipotence. The male psychic structures of grandiose omnipotence and defensive autonomy are increasingly being taken up by middle-class women who are now as pressured as men to lead successful careers (Layton, 2004). What frustrates speaking against suffering at work are thus defense mechanisms, which are masculine in origin, but which are, due to the omnipresence of neoliberal

ideology, now much more widespread among both men and women in a variety of occupations.

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